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AUTHOR Anderson, Spencer
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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the population in need of adult education, how to attract learners, the need to promote English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) instruction, how to target the state's responsibilities, and the overall U.S. economic need to eliminate adult illiteracy. Research indicates that between 20 and 30 million American adults are seriously handicapped in their work and everyday lives by not having basic literacy skills. Furthermore: (1) 99% of all workers need to read in order to accomplish their job tasks; (2) one out of three mothers on welfare is unable to read; (3) people with fewer than six years of schooling are four times more likely to end up on welfare than those with at least nine years of schooling; and (4) 60 million American adults do not have high school diplomas. Federal- and state-funded programs in adult literacy attract only 8% of the illiterate population, and 20% of those do not attend classes. This paper concludes that the more than 1,700 community colleges in the U.S. are excellent venues to promote literacy education. State and federal agencies must cooperate with community colleges to develop the financial structure required to educate the illiterate population. (KP)

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Overcoming Adult Illiteracy
Utilizing the Community College System

Spencer Anderson

Texas A & M University - Commerce

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Abstract

Research indicates that between 20 and 30 million adult Americans are seriously handicapped in their work and everyday lives by not having basic literacy skills. Such facts should arouse our humanitarian, civic, and economic conscience. Federal and State funded programs in adult literacy attract only 8% of this population, and 20% of those do not attend the classes. This study identifies the population in need of adult education, how to attract learners, the need to promote ESL instruction, targeting the State's responsibilities, and the overall U. S. economic need to eliminate adult illiteracy. Over 1,700 community colleges in the U. S. are excellent venues to educate the illiterate population. Facilities are usually centrally located in urban areas and rural towns; flexible class scheduling would promote and encourage student participation. This study addresses these issues.

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Overcoming Adult Illiteracy

The emphasis of this research paper focuses on adult illiteracy. It is estimated that this affliction in the U. S. effects over 27 million citizens --- a staggering number. Millions of people living in the land of abundance and opportunity are illiterate? How can this be? There are no exact statistics that can support the number of illiterate people in our country, but various methods have been used to arrive at over 27 million people. Anderson (1990) says that "I can't prove that 27, 311, 473 of our population are not literate --- and neither can anyone else." Beder (1991) goes even further in estimating the non-literate U. S population when he says:

In recent years the topic of adult literacy has received considerable attention. Although estimates of illiteracy vary greatly, we are told that as many as 60 million adults may be functionally illiterate in the United States, and that our national productivity and place in the world are at stake unless we improve our literacy rate (p. 1).

In 1975, Terence Bell, the U. S. Commissioner of Education, shocked the nation with the announcement that more than half of the U. S. adult population was "functionally illiterate" which refers to a person unable to perform simple, everyday tasks such as completing a job or apartment lease application form, or balancing a checkbook. "Occupational literacy" refers to those skills needed for a specific job. This news held the media's interest for less than two weeks. No shock. No public outcry. Are we giving up on our least educated citizens as we enter the 21st century? Some may ask why we should care, and where would we educate them? Developing a strategy to

respond to the needs of our illiterate adults will present some exciting challenges for our community colleges. However, their ability to accommodate the needs of the community is well-known; state and federal incentives are needed to expedite an effective program.

The Impact of Illiteracy on Society

The concept of adult literacy is elusive because, as our society becomes more complex and technological, the literacy skills needed to function have become more sophisticated. According to research by Chall (1990):

Leaders in business and industry are demanding workers with higher-level skills, workers who can not only read and write but can think creatively and critically and solve problems. About 60% of the total student population and 80% of minority students fall below the literacy level needed in our modern technological information age. While these percentages seem to be extremely high, there is ample evidence that the problem is serious and has become a major concern at the national level.

Research conducted in preparing this paper from various sources reveals some interesting data including: (1) 99% of all workers need to read in order to accomplish their job tasks; (2) One out of three mothers on welfare is unable to read; (3) People with fewer than six years of schooling are four times more likely to end up on welfare than are those with at least nine years of schooling; (4) 60 million adults in the U. S. do not have high school diplomas; and (5) IBM rejects the job applications of 1,700 people each month because they lack the basic skills to do the required work. We can determine

from this research that there are many viable reasons the American public should be concerned with the issue of illiteracy in our country. Chisman (1990) believes that our fellow citizens who lack the skills required to participate fully in the nation's life arouses humanitarian, civic, and economic concerns as illustrated below:

1. The Humanitarian Stake: The pathos of people unable to read stories to their children or covering up their lack of basic skills on the job --- these realities deserve humanitarian appeal (p. 5).

2. The Civic Stake: It is hard to imagine how people with very limited literacy can be well-informed voters or even how they can learn enough about the issues of the day to be motivated to vote at all (p. 6).

3. The Economic Stake: Literacy is a life-and-death economic issue for the United States. Productivity --- the amount of goods and services created by each individual worker --- is probably the most salient economic problem of our time.

Employers are looking for *trainable workers* to fill these complex jobs --- basic skills to learn and increasingly broad array of job-specific tasks is essential (p. 6-7).

In recent years community colleges have talked about the need to move away from teacher behavior to student learning; adult literacy offers such a vehicle. Actual teachers will, for the most part, come from outside the college; adjunct faculty will enhance this project. Quigley (1997) illustrates that the elimination of illiteracy in the U. S. would (p. 28):

1. Reduce the illiterate's vulnerability to drug and alcohol abuse, and reduce numbers of illiterates in jails;

2. Develop "character" (for example, break the "literacy generational cycle", and improve parenting skills); and

3. Reduce welfare payments, and increase the numbers of taxpayers.
4. The time is ripe for all community colleges to reassess their missions, vision, and goals. An adult literacy educational master-plan should be a major goal within the community college system throughout the United States.

From 1980 to 1991, according to the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium (NAEPDC) (1991), "the combined funding to adult literacy programs from states and the federal government rose almost four and a half times, from \$ 174.3 million to \$ 779 million --- an increase of approximately \$ 84.69 per student to \$ 209.35 per student." A study by the NAEPDC (1992) reported that 3, 696, 973 learners were being served by federally funded programs in 1990. According to Quigley (1997):

Funded programs in adult literacy attract only 8 percent of those eligible for them.....20 percent of those who say they will attend do not show up, and of those that do the overall attrition rate during the 1993-1994 program year was 74 percent....the dropout rate was 18 percent before twelve hours of instruction had been completed, 20 percent at sixteen weeks, 50 percent after sixteen weeks, and eventually 74 percent overall. On average, adult literacy education students receive only 4.9 hours of instruction per week, for those that participate in the program (p. 8).

Strategies for Solving the Illiteracy Problem

Federal data shows in 1988 only 8% of those eligible for adult literacy education participated in formal training. This is true despite the fact that programs are free and the benefits of literacy are clear. Obviously, solutions are needed to deal with the problem of adult literacy, and to a great extent answers lie in an understanding of the nonparticipation phenomenon (Pugsley, 1990). If participation is to occur adults must be motivated to attend classes. What is known about nonparticipation? Johnstone

and Rivera (1965) asked their adult research subjects to respond to ten reasons for not attending adult education classes. According to their research:

Reasons varied from such things as "couldn't afford it," "too busy," and "too tired at night," to "don't know of available courses," "would feel childish," "feel too old to learn," and "don't need classes." In summary, 48% indicated that cost and lack of time were barriers; being too tired at night was mentioned by 45%; lack of information regarding classes was reported by 35%; and not needing classes was mentioned by 12%.

The remainder of this study will focus on three main areas offering the greatest probability of overcoming illiteracy in the shortest period of time including:

1. How to attract learners
2. Promoting ESL instruction
3. Targeting state, federal, and community college responsibilities

How to Attract Learners

Research indicates that the majority of adults who are eligible for adult literacy education do not seek it --- attracting learners is a major problem. Why? A common element is the individuals low self-esteem; overcoming this stigma is the first goal of an adult literacy program. Research by Bedert and Valentine (1987) suggests:

The need for young people to launch themselves in the adult world is a major motivation to attend adult literacy education classes. Young adults need literacy to improve their status in the adult world and to better fulfill newly acquired adult roles such as spouse, parent, and worker.

Aggressive promotional and marketing messages for young adults might stress the importance of literacy to parenting, occupational advancement and independence.

Promoting ESL Instruction

Immigrant influx into the U. S. society is growing annually. Their basic skills in the labor market are vastly needed --- their ability to speak English would enhance their productivity and economic contributions. Chisman (1990) recommends the following course of action (p. 195):

1. Nationwide federal funding for teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) should include local schools, community colleges, and other institutions.
2. Classes should be scheduled at a variety of times during the day and be offered in students' own neighborhoods.
3. ESL programs must develop more full-time teaching positions.
4. A national center concerned with basic and applied research in adult learning should have a vigorous program of research and development in ESL.
5. Fully reexamine our primary and secondary school offerings and teaching techniques of languages to youths still in school.

Targeting State's Responsibilities

Despite the rhetoric attesting to the critical importance of adult literacy to the nation's well-being, 94% of the adult literacy teachers work part-time, and 40% are unpaid volunteers. The number of full time teachers has declined 48% since 1980 (Pugsley, 1990). States now spend more than the federal government on basic skills instruction. High federal deficits means that federal resources will be constrained for the foreseeable future. Chisman (1990) has identified several important tasks that the states must accomplish including (p. 199):

1. Strategic planning: What are the short-term and long-term goals and how do we maximize our effectiveness?

2. **Motivation:** Millions of adults need to be motivated to invest time and effort in literacy programs.

3. **Technology:** New approaches for delivering educational services to widely divergent populations of adults who need basic skills.

4. **Professionalism:** A cadre of adult basic skills educators need to be expanded and strengthened.

5. **Program effectiveness:** Many existing programs will have to be improved and made more effective in delivering literacy services.

Conclusion and Implications

Over the years community colleges have produced an entrepreneurial and collaborative approach to education. By promoting adult literacy and recruiting and training the actual teachers, they can expand their mission. Facilities and equipment are in place and readily available. State and federal agencies and community colleges must cooperate, developing the financial structure required to educate our illiterate population. Various government and independent research reports indicate that by the early part of the 21st century 35 million Americans will have to improve their literacy abilities if we are to meet the U. S. labor needs. The 15 to 20 million people, or more, who have severe basic skill deficits are those who must improve their abilities the most. Unless steps are taken to upgrade their skills soon, all of us will suffer because: (1) Our rate of economic growth will stagnate; (2) Welfare costs will escalate; (3) Foreign competition will make more rapid inroads; (4) Our national standard of living will decline; and (5) ESL and immigration problems will continue to increase. Our nation's economic future depends to a very significant extent on whether we can improve the basic skills of today's adults and whether we can do so very soon. This is probably the most compelling stake we all have in the literacy problem.

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